

VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE AND GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE AS CORRELATES OF SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN ESSAY WRITING IN IBADAN NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

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Abstract

The study investigated vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence as correlates of senior secondary school students' achievement in essay writing in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State. The study adopted the descriptive research design of the correlational type. Five (5) senior secondary schools were randomly selected from forty-two (40) public senior secondary schools in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State. Fifty (50) students were randomly selected from each school making a total of two hundred and fifty students (250). Three instruments were used for data collection for the study: Essay Writing Achievement Test ($r = .81$), Students' Vocabulary Knowledge Test ($r = .84$) and Students' Grammatical Competence Test ($r = .79$). Three research questions were raised and answered. Data collected were analyzed using Multiple Regression Analysis at 0.5 level of significance. The results showed that there was a positive significant relationship between vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence and students' achievement in essay writing. ($r = .432, p < 0.05$), ($r = .435, p < 0.05$). It was revealed that there was a joint contribution of the two independent variables (vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence) to students' achievement in essay writing ($\text{Adj } R^2 = 0.274$) ($F_{(2,497)} = 95.204$). The independent variables account for 27.4% of the total variance in students' achievement in essay writing. The result showed that vocabulary knowledge contributed relatively to students' achievement in essay writing ($\beta = 0.260$). Also, grammatical competence contributed relatively to students' achievement in essay writing ($\beta = 0.346$). Based on the findings, it is recommended that teachers of English should pay more attention to the teaching of English vocabulary and grammar in order to make students develop acceptable level of competence in vocabulary and grammar.

Keywords: Vocabulary knowledge, Grammatical competence, Achievement, Essay writing

Introduction

Writing involves not just a graphic representation of speech, but the development and presentation of thoughts in a structured way. Omaggio (2013) defined

writing as a continuum of activities that range from more mechanical or formal aspect of writing down on the one hand to a more complex act of composing on the other

hand. It is an activity that humans do not acquire naturally but learn formally and consciously, irrespective of their geographical location (Ezeokoli and Igubor, 2016). Writing skill is seen as a skill that is important over the other language skills. According to Kolawole (2003), writing skill occupies a more prominent position among other skills. It is particularly very important in academic advancement.

According to Fakeye and Ohia (2016), writing skill occupies a more prominent position among other language skills within the school system. It is very important in students' academic advancement because examinations are conducted through the medium of writing and students must be able to respond clearly to examination questions to make progress and proceed to another academic stage. Muodumogu and Unwaha (2013) viewed writing skill as foundational to success in academics, in the work place and in global economy. Writing skill is an important skill in all-round advancement. Individuals need writing skill in their day-to-day activities because writing is very important and useful. Job applicants must possess good writing skill for them to secure a good job because ability to write effectively is germane to successful employment.

The reason why a good writing skill is essential is because learners' general academic performance is assessed through the medium of writing. Students' performance in writing could affect their achievement, not only in English language as a subject but also other subjects (Igubor, 2015). As an important aspect of the English language, writing is tested at examinations such as West Africa Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and National Examination Council (NECO) in form of continuous writing which involves

essay writing and letter writing. Essay writing is a piece of writing which is composed of related ideas; that is made up of paragraphs.

Essay writing involves such processes as choosing topic to write on, identifying the audience or the reader of the essay, compiling content materials for the essay, organising the materials into logical order (paragraphing); using appropriate expression in terms of appropriate vocabulary, sentence construction and mechanics; punctuation, capitalisation, spelling and grammar (Igubor, 2015). Oruche (2014) asserted that writing an essay or composition means to compose a piece of writing by carefully putting together some ideas or points which are parts of a given topic. A good essay has three essential parts: An introductory paragraph which introduces the essay and states the main points in a thesis statement, the body which supports (shows, explains or proves) main point and support paragraphs and the concluding paragraph that summarises the whole ideas of the essay.

Candidates who are able to write good essays in English language perform better in other aspects of the subject such as comprehension and summary while those who are unable to write good essays in English language perform poorly in the subject (Igubor 2015). The West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) syllabuses 2016-2020 show that marks are allotted to different aspects of English language test as follows: Essay/letter writing, 50 marks; Comprehension, 20 marks; Summary, 30 marks making a total of 100 marks. The skill of writing is not limited to essay writing only because it is also required in the other two aspects (comprehension and summary). It means a student that lacks good writing skill will not perform as expected in all the

sections of paper one which means by implication probability of such student performing well in the examination will be very low. Students that fail English language will not be able to progress academically because a credit pass is required for them to gain admission into tertiary institutions in the country.

Despite the emphasis placed on the learning of English language and the efforts put in the teaching of the language, students still do not attain the mastery required for academic pursuit. The Chief Examiner of the West African Examination Council has always reported poor performance of students in English language. The poor performance is of great concern to everybody as it negates the aspirations of the students themselves as well as the purpose of secondary education. When looked into the reasons for the students' poor performance, English language scholars have attributed the persistent poor performance in English language and nearly all compulsory subjects at school certificate level to students' poor writing skill (Kolawole, 2003; and Fakeye, 2001).

According to the WAEC Chief Examiners Report (2014), students' problem with writing includes inadequate preparation manifesting itself in many forms like poor spelling, poor punctuation, inadequate exposure to idiomatic forms of English, ignorance of the rudiments of the language, construction of loose sentences, transliteration from mother tongue, lack of familiarity with the required formats, indiscriminate copying of passages in summary section, poor grammatical expressions, misinterpretation of questions and abuse of rules of grammar. The Chief Examiner observes that the reason for students' weakness in writing is that this aspect is not properly taught in schools. It

means more need to be done in the area of effective teaching and development of students' vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence.

Poor writing skill has been identified as a major cause of mass failure of students in English language examinations and the poor performance of students in the subject is of great concern to everybody as it negates the aspirations of the students themselves as well as the purpose of secondary education. Researchers have identified a lot of factors responsible for students' poor performance in the subject despite the importance attached to the subject. As a way of addressing this problem, scholars have carried out many studies, ranging from effective strategies for teaching essay writing, to addressing other teacher and student related factors. Although most of these studies came up with good contribution to the teaching and learning of essay writing, there is less emphasis on students' vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence. It means there are more to be done to improve students' performance in essay writing.

Vocabulary knowledge is the knowledge of the quantity of words and word meaning that one has in a particular language. It is not just to know the dictionary meaning or meanings of a word; it also means knowing the words commonly associated with it (its collocation) as well as its connotation including the register and its cultural accreditations. Roche and Harrinton (2013) noted that students with greater vocabulary knowledge will write better easy than students with less vocabulary knowledge. Developing learners' vocabulary knowledge ultimately facilitates richer listening and speaking abilities (Chang,

2007; Hinkel, 2004). Regardless of the degree of learners' competence in grammar and pronunciation, they cannot have effective communication without sufficient vocabulary knowledge. Yonek (2008) asserted that lack of vocabulary knowledge contributes to writing difficulty for foreign language and that vocabulary is one of the most essential features that determine writing quality. Vocabulary knowledge is more than just reading words or studying of individual words and its learning cannot occur in a vacuum; the meaning of a word cannot be acquired in isolation. Knowing words is multi-dimensional and the process occurs over time. Meaning resides in the intentional problem-solving and thinking process of the reader that occurs during interaction with the text (Adebakin, 2014). Adediran (2016) affirmed that students find it difficult to develop new vocabulary items and lack a stock of lexical sequence such as phrasal verbs, idioms collocations and sequence frames. Vocabulary knowledge helps students to master English for their purposes. In writing, a learner is able to express himself/herself through vocabulary.

Another factor which is also important is the grammatical competence. Grammatical competence is the ability to recognize lexical, morphological, syntactical and phonological features of a language and to use these features effectively to interpret, encode and decode words and sentences. Grammatical competence is also described as the knowledge we have of a language that accounts for our ability to produce sentences in a language (Richard, 2006).

Turula (2011) viewed grammar as what equals the agreed upon rules and norms of language and includes the comprehension of sentence structure. English grammar is the way in which meanings are encoded into words in the English language.

English grammar fosters precision, detect ambiguity and exploit the richness of expression available in English Language (Bradshaw, 2013). Grammar is a branch of study, that is, the body of descriptive statements concerning the systematic interrelationship of structures within the English Language.

Therefore, this study investigated vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence as correlates of senior secondary school students' achievement in essay writing in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State.

Essay writing is an important aspect of the English language as students' competence in the English language is essentially for admission into tertiary institution in the country. Despite the importance attached to the subject, studies have shown that students have poor writing skill and this makes their performance in English language examinations poor. As a way of addressing this problem, researchers have carried out studies on different strategies of teaching essay writing but with less emphasis on vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence. Literature indicates that there is a strong link with other aspects of English language such as comprehension and summary but the extent to which these two variables would predict students' achievement in essay writing, especially, in Ibadan has not received much research focus. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the extent to which vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence correlates with students' achievement in essay writing in senior secondary schools in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State.

Research Questions

1. What relationship exists between vocabulary knowledge, grammatical

competence and students' achievement in essay writing?

2. What is the relative contribution of vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence and students' achievement in essay writing?

3. What is the composite contribution of vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence and students' achievement in essay writing?

Methodology

The study adopted the correlational design type. Five (5) senior secondary schools were randomly selected from the

forty-two (42) public senior secondary schools in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo state. Fifty (50) students were randomly selected from each school making a total of two hundred and fifty students (250). In all, a total number of two hundred and fifty students (250) participated in the study. Three instruments were used for data collection: Essay Writing Achievement Test ($r = .81$), Students' Vocabulary Knowledge Test ($r = .84$) and Students' Grammatical Competence Test ($r = .79$). Data collected were analyzed using Multiple Regression Analysis and results were analyzed at 0.5 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: What relationship exists between vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence and students' achievement in essay writing?

Table 1: Correlation Matrix of the Relationship between the Independent Variables and the Dependent Variable

Variables	Students' achievement in essay writing	Students' vocabulary knowledge	Students' grammatical competence
Students' achievement in essay writing	1.000		
Students' vocabulary knowledge	0.432** (.000)	1.000	
Students' grammatical competence	0.475** (.000)	0.496** (.000)	1.000

Correlation Significant at 0.05 level

Table 1 shows the relationship that exists between the independent variables (students' vocabulary knowledge and students' grammatical competence) and dependent variable (students' achievement in essay writing). The table indicates that students' achievement in essay writing had positive

moderate relationship with students' vocabulary knowledge ($r = .432$) and students' grammatical competence ($r = .475$). These patterns of relationship imply that students' vocabulary knowledge and students' grammatical competence were directly related to students' achievement in essay writing.

Research Question 2: What is the composite contribution of vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence to students' achievement in essay writing?

Table 2 Summary of Regression Analysis of the combined independent variables on students' achievement in essay writing

R= 0.526

R Square= 0.277

R Square (Adjusted)= 0.274

Standard Error of Estimate= 5.37

Analysis of Variance							
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Remark
1	Regression	5490.867	2	2745.434	95.204	.000 ^b	Sig
	Residual	14332.205	497	28.837			
	Total	19823.072	499				

The above table shows the joint contribution of the two independent variables (students' grammatical competence and students' vocabulary knowledge) to the dependent variable ((students' achievement in essay writing). The two independent variables, when pooled together, had a significant joint contribution to the prediction of students' grammatical competence

($F_{(2;497)} = 95.204$, $\text{Adj.}R^2 = 0.274$ $p < 0.5$). The result also shows a coefficient multiple regression (R) of 0.526, a multiple R. Square of 0.277 and adjusted R square of 0.274. This means that 27.4% of the variance in students' achievement in essay writing is accounted for by the combination of the two independent variables used in the study and that other variables and residuals not included in this model may have accounted for the remaining variance of 72.6%.

Research Question 3: What is the relative contribution of students' vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence to students' achievement in essay writing?

Table 3 Summary of relative contribution of the independent variables to students' achievement in essay writing

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-2.100	.923		-2.275	.023
Students' vocabulary knowledge	.124	.021	.260	5.925	.000
Students' grammatical competence	.186	.024	.346	7.876	.000

Table 3 points to the relative contribution of the two independent variables (vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence) to the dependent variable (students' achievement in essay writing), expressed as standard coefficient of beta weights. The result indicates that students' vocabulary knowledge ($\beta = 0.26$) and students' grammatical competence ($\beta = 0.34$) relatively contributed to students' achievement in essay writing. This implies that each independent variable individually contributed to students' achievement in essay writing.

Discussion of Findings

The result revealed that there was a positive significant relationship between students' vocabulary knowledge, students' grammatical competence and students' achievement in essay writing. This study is in line with Shamsuzzaman, Mohammad, John Everatt, and Brigid McNeill (2015) who revealed that grammar and vocabulary

are correlated with essay writing output but that these relationships vary across learners. The finding also correlates with Bradshaw, (2013) who stated that English grammar fosters precision, detects ambiguity and exploits the richness of expression available in English Language. The finding of this study is not similar with Pignot-Shahov (2012) who suggested that diversified nature of word knowledge makes impossible to test all the different knowledge facets of a word at the same time. and also reiterated that a small number of well-established vocabulary tests provide valuable information for teachers, learners and assessment bodies by investigating and providing data for some aspects of word knowledge and aiming at validating theories and models of the mental lexicon on the grounds that knowing how words are stored and learned helps to improve language course content, delivery and assessment as well as to further develop our understanding of language learning processes.

The result also revealed that vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence contributed relatively to students' achievement in essay writing. It is believed that vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence contribute to writing quality. This finding is in agreement with Pichette, Serres & Lafontaine (2012) who suggested that writing a text may lead to significantly higher recall than reading if enough time is allocated for each task and therefore, language teachers may resort to writing tasks that incorporate newly taught words in order to enhance students' retention. However, the finding of this study does not agree with Locke, Robinson and Zhu (2004) who reported that there is no evidence that grammar and vocabulary are essential in writing good essay.

It was further revealed that vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence when taken together contribute significantly to students' achievement in essay writing. This implies that each independent variable individually contributed to students' achievement in essay writing. The implication of this finding is that vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence are potent variables that should not be underestimated as they have direct impact on the achievement of the students in essay writing. However, the students' performance in essay writing can only be improved if their vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence are enhanced.

The result is similar to Zhou (2009) who found that vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence when put together have a joint contribution to students' achievement in essay writing. This is also in line with Roche and Harrinton (2013) who noted that students with greater vocabulary knowledge will write easy than students with less vocabulary knowledge and Coxhead

(2012), who affirmed that a certain level of vocabulary is needed to learn the target language and that vocabulary plays an important role in writing by enabling the use of the language in an active way. This submission was enumerated in a study in which students individually carried out an integrated reading and writing task and then participated in an interview which focused on their language learning background and academic studies through vocabulary use in the reading and writing task.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that students' achievement in essay writing had positive moderate relationship with students' vocabulary knowledge and students' grammatical competence. The two independent variables, when pooled together, had a significant contribution to the prediction of students' grammatical competence. The result also indicates that students' vocabulary knowledge and students' grammatical competence relatively contributed to students' achievement in essay writing. This implies that each independent variable individually contributed to students' achievement in essay writing. Based on the finding, the study has provided a better understanding of vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence as correlates of students' achievement in essay writing in senior secondary schools in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that English language teachers should create a friendly and supportive environment that will make students to write their essay properly. Also, teachers of English should pay more attention to the teaching of English structures in order to make their students

develop acceptable level of competence in English grammar.

Teachers should give assignment on essay writing to students regularly and they should ensure that they mark promptly. Students should read novels, good magazines and journals so that their vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence can improve. As a result, they would be able to write good essays. Parents should provide the necessary materials such as textbooks, dictionaries, writing materials and notebooks for their children. They should also help those students that are performing below expectation by organizing private lessons for better performance.

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